

17 January, 2010
Grove Presbyterian Church

"Why does religion have to be so political?"

Probably the young person is asking this because of the petty, manipulative, and tawdry stuff. Everybody wanting their piece of the pie. Claiming to be right under the delusion, the lie, that they are doing the will of God and everybody else had better get on board.

God bless me: Allah wants me to explode my bomb in the crowded market.

God bless me: God wants me to shoot this doctor because he is an abortionist.

Or crosses topped with flagpoles signaling that Americanism is Christianity, and vice versa.

Bishops up Scranton bickering that Congressional Representatives who are Roman Catholic and support abortion rights should be denied communion.

Skewed voter guides inserted into bulletins, with a *'nudge nudge wink wink'* that only real Christians vote this way - pick your flavor: stems calls, school prayer, school vouchers, poverty policies, open immigration, public option, abortion rights -- or that we should vote for real Christians (even if they are dumber than a stump and far more inexperienced than an intelligent Jew or Muslim).

It does get to be a bit unseemly at times. Can't we all just get along? No we can't. Not on our own. That's a Calvinist answer.

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There be many ways the church swims in the political pool.

Your per capita dollars fund a Presbyterian lobbyist in DC.

Our General Assembly votes resolutions about boycotts, Israeli-Palestinian relations, immigration laws, health

care, domestic violence, school prayer, abortion, capital punishment.

I stand on court house steps and offer prayers.

We encourage you to vote, more so, to get out there and hold office. What could be more honorable?

"In God We Trust" says my dollar bill. All others pay cash...

Swearing in on Bibles. Or the Koran.

Congressional prayer breakfasts.

Your tax dollars pay for military chaplains, from Imams to Rabbis to Priests.

We place national flags in our sanctuaries.

Since Reagan's administration, your government sends an Ambassador to the Vatican (which makes us Protestants wonder how come we don't get an ambassador too).

And the IRS distributes guidelines detailing which political activity by churches and pastors is permissible and which is impermissible, lest your non-profit status get yanked.

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Historically too. The church has been hip deep in politics. And I love it. Mostly. Take religion out of the equation and where would we be?

Was not Jeremiah political when he preached that his nation was foolish and criminal and should surrender to the enemy? Them calling him a traitor and tossing him in prison.

Were not Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed'nego political when they refused to obey the unjust laws of Nebuchadnezzar?

Was not John Knox political when he rebuked the Queen for repressing Protestantism?

Was not Jonathan Witherspoon political when he preached from his Princeton pulpit about the necessity of the American Revolution?

Who do you think took on slavery as incompatible with humanity, religion, and good government?

Who first challenge Nazism as demonic? Pastor Bonhoeffer.

Was not John Mackay, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, political when he was among the first to challenge Joseph McCarthy and the House of Un-American Activities, calling him un-American for mistaking dissent with treason?

Was not Martin Luther King Jr. political when he led boycotts and marches?

We've been meddling for centuries. Calvinism has a honed view of the political order. Take the people who are trying to love God out of politics and where would we be?

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## **Principles of Calvinism and the Political Order**

**By George Hunt**

1. The civil order is ordained of God to protect the church and promote the inalienable rights and promote the general welfare of all people (if your rights are not protected, neither are mine); government is as necessary to humankind as heat and water, light and air. If we truly loved God and loved each other we'd have no need of government or rules, but since we are sinful government is ordained to protect and bring order
2. Calvinism rejects an 'aristocracy' attitude, replacing it with a confidence in the wisdom of the people choosing leaders based upon merit
3. The Christian may resist tyrants and tyranny, but cautiously and as a last resort
4. Calvinism requires Christians to be at the forefront of every drive for liberty and freedom, binding the Christian church to its prophetic mission to promote God's justice and to preserve the majesty of truth
5. Governors rule by the consent of their governed, where those who rule and those ruled express mutual responsibility
6. All rulers rule subject to the law

7. All human institutions are fallible and need checks and balances
8. Persons are called into service of church and nation by the voice of God and are to rule in godly fear and faithfulness to his example of justice, charity, compassion
9. We do not confuse dissent for treason; it is the duty of citizens to challenge the authority of government when that government would compel them to do things which they believe to be contrary to the will of God
10. The state must allow complete religious freedom, for civil liberties cannot be maintained where religious liberties are constrained
11. Separation of Church and state does not imply that a nation divorces itself from religious consciousness or from religious impulses; it does protect the church from the interference of the state

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Now, we recognize there are some who bleat and bray that religion mixed up in politics is the reason for our conflicts. In the name of God, they say, more suffering has been inflicted upon humanity than for any other reason. That religion is the cause of war.

Exactly which wars are you talking about? World War I and II? Caused by religion? Vietnam? Korea? Iraq? The Falkland Island War? I don't think so. More like oil, greed, revenge, fear, pride, power.

We'll own up to what we need to own up, but we also will refute as specious and lazy the criticism that if we didn't have religion we'd be a peaceful world. Sure we can point the finger at the inquisition or crusades or the knee-capping between the IRA and the UDL, or the Taliban versus everyone else.

But don't you think we'd find another excuse to kill each other?

Religion is just very convenient at galvanizing emotions and justifying agendas.

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If we are concerned with oppression, how can we not be political?

If we are concerned with abuse and poverty, how can we not be political?

If we are concerned with redeeming violence, how can we not be political?

If we grieve the tortured soul -- to free tortured lives, whether tortured by others or by themselves -- how can we not be political? .

A week ago, my friend Jerry, one of Danville's Police Officers, found an 18 year old girl freezing to death in a parking lot off Mill Street. It was 3 AM. She had been dumped there by her boyfriend. Jerry draped a blanket around her shoulders and took her to the Gate House, which welcomed her and gave her a warm bed and warmer love.

That is when politics works. That is when church and government can work well together.

You want my take on all those big bank bonuses being bickered and bandied about? I say make sure those silk suits get them. If anything give them bigger bonuses. But on one condition: they need fly into Port-au-Prince and walk the rubble, corpse-strewn streets of Haiti for just one hour.

Do you know the real reason so many have died there in Haiti? It was not the earthquake that killed but decades of bad government and corruption, failed policies and suffocating poverty. Death has come because of greed and ignorance and prejudice and tyrants.

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Can anything not be political? We are political beings.

We also are spiritual beings. And that is the distinction we cannot, must not forget to bring to bear. We speak of soul-force. The terrifying majesty of truth.

The world marches to the drumbeat of the world, someone once preached. The drumbeat of power and might, control and right.

Do you hear the different rhythm, reverberating against the tympanic membrane of our souls?

For we who belong to Jesus do not march to this drumbeat - never can, never shall - but, from Mill Street to Port-au-Prince, from the folding chairs of Mahoning Township to the mahogany tables of Congress, we march to the drumbeat of this drum major with the divine difference.

For we also confess the ultimate inadequacy of all systems to redeem. If government were the solution, then Jesus would have taken out Pilate and Herod and set himself down on the throne instead of carrying the cross. If politics were the solution, then Jesus would have claimed power and authority and had his disciples handing out voter guides and bumper stickers.

But he didn't. He wouldn't become his own anti-Christ and deny his own purpose and essence. For his kingdom is not of this world. And Jesus constantly warns us about selling our souls to the way of the world, as if power and money and fame and cleverness can save anyone.

For it is not by power but by love.

This is what spurred Jeremiah to decry his own government at his own peril. Because he loved God and loved his people. Jeremiah saw in them the very failure of government, the limits of government. Politics is keen to justify. Faith seeks to redeem.

Government can prevent you from lynching your neighbor but cannot make you love him.